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## Decentralization and the quality of public service delivery in Tanzania

Lameck, W.U.

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# Summary

## Introduction, conceptual framework and research question

Over the past decades, many developing countries have adopted decentralization reforms. Frequently, these reforms were induced or enforced by international sponsors who subscribe to the theory that the proximity between the government and citizens promotes local democracy and accountable government, which will establish policies and render services that reflect the preferences of citizens. In some cases, decentralization has increased the quality of governance resulting in better access to services such as education and health care. In other cases, however, decentralization has failed to fulfill the high expectations. Services do not reflect the preferences of the citizens and their intrinsic quality has either declined or remained unchanged. Overall, in developing countries, the failures outweigh the success of the reforms that were undertaken. The literature offers a series of different explanations for these failures. However, so far, the available literature offers pieces of the puzzle, it does not paint the full picture. The goal of the research was to gain an in-depth understanding of the performance of decentralized systems of public administration, of the relative importance of different factors, and of how these interact or work out in combination in a specific context.

In order to guide the research, we developed a conceptual framework founded on the basic assumptions of sociological institutionalism. We distinguished between three independent variables: the *formal system of administration*, i.e. rules established by a public authority that define the tasks and competence of public organizations, regulate intergovernmental relations and establish decision-making procedures; *informal institutions*, i.e. rules with an informal character that give meaning to reality or create a common understanding of what is appropriate behavior in a certain situation; and the *availability of resources* which determines opportunities and constraints for policy-making and service delivery. The key assumption of the research was that these factors, separately and in interaction, determine the *process*, i.e. the interaction of actors involved in the delivery of services, and its *output*, i.e. the quality of public services. To evaluate the practice and output of service delivery, we used a number criteria that are frequently put forward as the possible benefits of decentralization: the democratic caliber of local decision-making; allocative efficiency, i.e. the extent services reflect local preferences; and the extent services are delivered in a coordinated way, are cost efficient and are tailored to local or individual circumstances.

We selected the delivery of agricultural extension services in Tanzania as a suitable area for our research. Agricultural extension services include the transfer of technological know-how to farmers, the assistance to farmers' groups with projects to enhance production or improve marketing skills, and the collective training of farmers in field schools or workshops. In 1999, the responsibility to deliver these services was transferred from central to local government. Since then, local governments have been criticized for their failure to realize services that reflect the needs and preferences of the farmers and take local and individual circumstances into account. The quality of the services rendered has been presented as substandard. To gain insight into the functioning and performance of the administrative system for the delivery of agricultural extension services the following research question was formulated:

*How does the decentralized system of agricultural extension service delivery in Tanzania function and perform, and how can the formal system of public administration, informal institutions and the availability of resources explain the process of delivery and its output?*

## Methodology

A literature review conducted with the help of our conceptual framework provided a series of insights into the role of features of the administrative system, of certain informal institutions and of the availability of resources in the delivery of services. However, it did not offer a basis for hypotheses about the relative weight and interaction between different factors. Therefore, we adopted a qualitative research approach as a suitable means to unravel the presumed complex relationships between the variables of our model. A qualitative approach would allow for a precise reconstruction of the planning process in local government and for a detailed study of the actual delivery of services by field extension officers.

We chose to conduct two case studies and to research the delivery of services in the urban municipality of Morogoro and in the rural Hai District. In these two local governments, the process of decision-making about plans and budgets for extension services was reconstructed. Moreover, in each of the two cases, the involvement of farmers in the planning process and the actual delivery of services by field officers was studied in detail in three wards, i.e. administrative subunits of local government. Finally, we studied the role of agricultural research institutes, whose task it is to support local governments.

In each of the case-studies, we used a variety of data collection techniques: content analysis of policy documents and reports; formal and informal interviews with members of the local councils, local government officials, field extension officers, officials from the agricultural research institutes and from the ministry of agriculture, representatives of NGOs active in

the field, representatives of farmers' associations and individual farmers; focus group discussions with farmers' groups; observations of meetings and field trips.

### **Main empirical findings**

The research conducted resulted in a series of key findings concerning the decision-making about local plans and budgets for agricultural extension services, the actual delivery of services and the relation between research institutes and local governments.

In the decision-making about local plans and budgets for agricultural extension services non-elected officials play a dominant role. Local officials draft five-year strategic and annual plans, and they do so in such a way that they fit central government priorities laid down in national plans and meet the conditions attached to grants provided by central government. Following procedures for the development of strategic plans, stake-holders were consulted before a draft was tabled to the local council, but their input was not included in the plans. In the same vein, in both local governments, farmers were involved in the development of annual plans and could suggest extension projects. But extension officers were leading in the consultation process and were decisive at the moment of compiling village plans into ward plans and a district plan, which in the end reflected the priorities of central government.

Before plans are submitted to the councils, they are reviewed by the regional secretariat of central government to ensure that they do not conflict with national policies. In their subsequent deliberations, council committees in the two local governments did not question the priorities or measures included in the plans, nor did they articulate local preferences; the full councils approved the plans such as they were put to them without substantial debate. All in all, the transfer of the delivery of extension services to local government did not result in decision-making in which elected representatives or societal stakeholders determine which extension projects are financed and which services are rendered. As a consequence, plans and the allocation of budgets do not reflect the preferences of the local community.

The research suggests a number of explanations for these findings. First, local councils formally establish plans and policies and services are rendered by local officials, but in many other aspects the formal administrative system is still centralistic. National policies define priorities, local governments heavily depend on earmarked grants to finance extension activities and central government agencies supervise local decisions. The room for local governments to set their own priorities is limited. Secondly, local administrators and local councilors share a culture of upward accountability; they are guided by the rule that you cannot and must not ignore the guidelines and priorities set by central government. For local administrators, this culture of upward

accountability finds its origin in the fact that they depend on central government for their recruitment and promotion. In turn, local councilors are confronted with hierarchical structures of their political parties, which makes their political career dependent on their allegiance to national party manifestos.

The actual delivery of agricultural extension services to farmers in the two local governments suffers serious flaws. It is inefficient in the sense that fully paid extension officials only dedicate part of their work time to their actual tasks and the rest to paid services that do not fall within their job description. Allocative efficiency is not realized: while there is an evident need for advice to and training of crop growing farmers, most of the time and effort of extension officials goes into the assistance of livestock keepers, who pay for the services rendered. Unless financial resources are allocated to a group project, farmers' groups are only serviced if they live nearby or have developed a special bond with the extension officer. And lastly, overall, the transfer of knowledge, the field schools and training sessions are offered in a standardized form, and generally do not take into account the different levels of education of the clients. How can the formal administrative system in place, informal institutions and the availability of resources explain the flaws in the delivery of services?

A first explanation is that field officers enjoy a large amount of discretion. Apart from the allocation of budgets to certain extension projects, agricultural plans do not specify the services to be delivered. In both local governments, the responsible departments work with general instructions. Although in Hai District supervision on field officers was stricter than in Morogoro, overall, field extension officers to a large extent decide what services to provide and to whom. A second explanation relates to the scarcity of resources: working tools, agricultural input for field schools, means of transport and fuel are scarce, and are sometimes lacking all together. This makes it difficult to visit remote areas or to address specific needs of farmers. However, the scarcity of resources does not fully explain the dominant pattern of service delivery, i.e. the fact that extension officers preferably service farmers who are willing to pay. Our research shows that extension officers are guided by the social rule that the delivery of services is not a duty but a favor, and that some compensation for their efforts is in order. Overall, farmers do not challenge this rule.

Agricultural research institutes are expected to conduct research that is driven by the demands of their clients: local governments and farmers. Subsequently, their role is to transfer knowledge on agricultural technology to local governments and train their extension staff. The research conducted by the two agricultural research institutes we studied – Ilonga ARI and Selian Ari - is not driven by the demands of local governments or farmers in their zone.

The main reason is that both institutes heavily rely on funds provided by (private) donors. This implies that funds are available for certain research topics, that the public institutes have to orient their proposals to these topics and sometimes compete with private research organizations to obtain funding. In addition, both institutes are reluctant to spend the limited grants they receive from central government to projects requested by local governments: they honor the priorities formulated in national research programs or prefer fundamental scientific research over applied research requested by local governments.

With respect to the dissemination of knowledge and training activities the Selian ARI is significantly more active than the Ilonga ARI, and overall the relationship between Selian ARI and local governments such as Hai district is closer than the relationship between the Ilonga ARI and Morogoro Municipality. Here, the economic importance of agriculture plays a role. In Hai, agriculture is of much higher economic value than in Morogoro, and therefore it is given a relatively high priority by the local government, farmers and the institute.

Our research covered a number of practices: the decision-making on planning and the role of councilors and administrators therein; the operations of field extension officers and their interaction with farmers; the interaction between the research institutes on one hand and local governments and other stakeholders on the other. In many cases these practices are ruled by formal procedures that prescribe meetings, group sessions or other types of interaction in which the actors involved are supposed to meet face to face to discuss, confer, negotiate, teach or learn. One of the findings of our research is that the delivery of agricultural services is hindered by the social rule that no meeting, no workshop, no field school, no visit outside the office can take place if the councilors, officials or farmers involved do not receive a sitting allowance, a per diem or some compensation in kind. If no resources are available for sitting allowances, meetings between research institutes, municipalities and farmers' organizations, that should result in demand driven research, do not take place. If no resources are available to pay extension officers special allowances for carrying out a project, they reduce their visits. The absence of material compensation for farmers results in a low participation in field schools and training sessions. Overall, the social rule that allowances or compensation are in place for any activity that is not considered to belong to the core of one's duties, has a negative impact on the process and outcome of the system of public administration.

## Theoretical findings and recommendations

Our research confirms and sometimes specifies the results of earlier research on how a formal administrative system, the availability of resources and informal institutions separately influence the performance of decentralized systems of public administration. Our research also shows how these factors can interact. We found two instances in which such interaction reinforced the impact of the separate factors. The first concerned the relation between formal and informal institutions. A limited administrative discretion and the fact that local administrators and politicians depend on national political leaders and government officials for their career has originated a social rule that local plans and budgets must conform to central government rules and priorities. The second instance concerned the relation between informal institutions and resources. The rule that no meeting can take place without offering the participants a compensation for their efforts forces those in charge of budgeting to reserve financial resources to pay for sitting allowances. This makes scarce resources even more scarce.

We also found instances in which social rules, in combination with the scarcity of resources, undermine formal institutions. Procedural requirements for the development of agricultural plans or the planning of research activities were simply set aside with the argument that you cannot organize a meeting without funds for allowances. In the same vein, field officers invoke the lack of fuel or time as reasons not to visit farmers or farmers' groups, even if they live nearby or no specific tools are necessary. In this way, the formal right all farmers have to be assisted by extension officers is neutralized.

Our findings support our original claim that to gain an in-depth understanding of the functioning and performance of systems of public administration, it is necessary to take the different variables included in our framework into account, both separately and in their mutual interaction. This idea has also inspired a number of recommendations. One concerns the suggestion to involve the local council in the hiring of senior local staff, for example by giving it the right to choose a candidate from a shortlist provided by central government. This could contribute to a reduction of the culture of upward accountability of local officials. In the same vein, we suggest to enhance the involvement of the local community in the nomination of candidates for local elections in order to increase their accountability to the local community. Both recommendations concern a reform of formal institutions to provoke a change in social rules. We also suggest a reform of the perverting system of sitting allowances, but we are aware of the fact that it reflects social rules and expectations that are deeply embedded in the public administration of Tanzania. It would require substantial moral, disinterested and powerful leadership to bring about the necessary change in the ethics of public administration to lay the ground for such reforms.